

INTRODUCTION

“No place is a place until the things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments.”

Wallace Stegner, *A Sense of Place*

The Past is Prologue

“At last...we stood on board the schooner. Hoisting sail, it glided down the Acushnet river. On one side, New Bedford rose in terraces of streets, their ice-covered trees all glittering in the clear, cold air. Huge hills and mountains of casks on casks were piled upon her wharves, and side by side the world-wandering whale ships lay silent and safely moored at last; while from others came a sound of carpenters and coopers, with blended noises of fires and forges to melt the pitch, all betokening that new cruises were on the start; that one most perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye...” —Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

To the eyes of the 21-year-old Melville, about to embark on the adventurous whaling voyage that inspired his epic tale, New Bedford resonated with the vibrancy and fruits of maritime commerce. Melville’s words evoke the earthy sights, sounds, and smells of its teeming waterfront as well as the outward symbols of prosperity spawned by whaling and its related trades.

Indeed, whaling was the catalyst for New Bedford’s early development and success. Through the early 1800s the town grew rapidly and progressively to displace Nantucket as the epicenter of the industry. Entrepreneurial spirit and commercial

enterprises flourished. Maritime industries connected to whaling ships thrived along the waterfront. Business prospered, and construction kept pace as citizens endeavored to build an attractive city. Public buildings became architectural expressions of monumentality and permanence.

The eventual decline of commercially valuable whale stocks led to more extended and intensive pursuits of them, even far into the Arctic. Ultimately, a dwindling market for whale products and other demographic, economic, environmental, and technological factors ended New Bedford’s signature industry.

Textile manufacturing gradually supplanted whaling as the city’s primary industry. Commercial activity moved away from the waterfront as the city evolved into one of the nation’s leading textile centers, transforming the character of its commercial neighborhoods.

Transformed as well were the cultural mosaic and social fabric of the community. Population growth, sparked by the textile mills that attracted immigrants, further diversified the ethnic mix that had characterized New Bedford’s whaling era.

A mid-1920s ebb in textile manufacturing was fortuitously offset by the emergence of commercial fishing as an economic lifeline. Harbor improvements eventually made New Bedford a premier fishing port.

Nonetheless, severe decline of the waterfront district continued. Community-based efforts began in the 1960s to preserve, rehabilitate, and restore a working waterfront and the city’s historic core. This work has spurred a number of preservation initiatives, partnerships, and incentives, including

national historic landmark designations. Collaborations between public and private organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit, have heightened public awareness of New Bedford's cultural legacy and helped stabilize some of its historic assets.

The establishment of New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park in 1996 recognized the national significance of this community's rich history, architecture, and museum collections. The enabling legislation enjoined the National Park Service to share with the city of New Bedford and community-based organizations the stewardship responsibility for preserving this precious heritage in perpetuity. This general management plan, approved in August 2001, is intended to fulfill the letter and the spirit of that mandate.

“Like literature, music and art in their highest forms, our national parks contribute to our spiritual well-being, and they require our unending vigilance to preserve them for that purpose.”

Devereaux Butcher, Our National Parks